

Chicago, IL - U.S Representatives Mark Kirk (R-Highland Park), Judy Biggert (R-Hinsdale) and Joe Schwarz (R-Michigan) heard testimony today from three patients and three scientists urging reform of President Bush's restrictions on federal funding for stem cell research.

"Stem cell research offers the greatest potential for curing Alzheimer's Parkinson's and diabetes," said Congressman Kirk. "We need to pass legislation opening more opportunities for federal stem cell research to accelerate cures for these diseases. With stem cell research now happening overseas, we have a moral obligation to find cures here at home."

The ad-hoc hearing comes as the House of Representatives prepares to take up legislation that will relax President Bush's restrictions on federally-funded stem cell research. Passage of H.R. 810, the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2005, will expand research to stem cells that donors voluntarily provide once they are no longer needed for in vitro fertilization. Under current procedures, unused stem cells are discarded as medical waste. Kirk, Biggert and Schwarz are co-sponsors of the legislation. First Lady Nancy Reagan supports the legislation and stated that "we have already waited too long."

"It's time we allow researchers to go where the science leads and not where the politicians dictate," said Biggert, a senior member of the House Science Committee. "Everyone has a family member or friend who suffers from Diabetes, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's or other diseases. Unfortunately, without federal support, scientists won't have access to the stem cells they need to develop treatments and cures for a host of diseases that touch the lives of almost every American."

Testifying before Reps. Kirk, Biggert and Schwarz were Dr. John A. Kessler, a neurologist and stem cell researcher at Northwestern University, Dr. Steven Teitelbaum, a professor of Pathology at Washington University in St. Louis and Dr. Sean Morrison, who researches adult stem cells at the University of Michigan.

Dr. Kessler's stem cell advocacy became personal when his teenage daughter, Allison, was paralyzed from the waist down in a skiing accident. He currently uses paralyzed mice to test stem cell treatments.

"I absolutely, firmly believe, with every ounce of my intellect, that stem cell biology is going to

revolutionize medicine,” said Kessler. “I don’t know what the timetable will be. But whatever it is, I do know that every impediment that gets thrown up delays it. And that’s very personal to me now.”

Congressman Joe Schwarz, a practicing physician for more than 30 years, believes passing H.R. 810 is needed to strengthen regulations governing ethical stem cell research.

“This bill will prevent inappropriate research and it will protect life,” said Dr. Schwarz. “I value this approach because it will help us discover ways to improve and save lives.”

Also testifying before Kirk, Biggert and Schwarz were Daniel Heumann, vice President of the Daniel Heumann Fund for Spinal Cord Research who was paralyzed from the waist down from a car accident as a teenager, Clara Livingston, a nine-year-old child living with diabetes and Mary Anne Ostrenga, president of the American Parkinson’s Disease Association- Midwest Chapter. Mary Anne is currently living with Parkinson’s disease.

Clara Livingston’s life is far from average. She was diagnosed with diabetes at the age of four. She pricks her finger at least eight times a day to test her blood sugar and wears an insulin pump. She must also insert a one and a half inch needle into her stomach every two to three days. Clara carefully counts her carbohydrates to measure her proper dose of insulin. Her precautions are needed to prevent the complications common for juvenile diabetes: blindness, kidney failure, limb amputation and shortened life span. But Livingston said she will not let diabetes slow her down.

“Diabetes doesn’t stop me from going to school, participating in softball, or playing the violin,” said Livingston. “I don’t like finger pricks or shots. But I would like to find a cure because finding a cure will help make America and the rest of the world not worry about diabetes.”

President Bush issued an executive order limiting federal research only for stem cells created before August 9, 2001. At that time, he said the 72 stem cell lines were viable. Today, only 20 are viable.

H.R. 810 could open several hundred thousand stem cell lines. Due in part to the current federal restrictions, much of the promising stem cell research today now occurs in Britain, Israel and Singapore. Recently, California voters approved a \$3 billion research initiative to boost stem cell research in their state. Illinois and New Jersey are considering similar legislation.

As Co-Chairman of the 45-member House Republican Mainstream Tuesday Group, Rep. Kirk helped win a commitment from Speaker Hastert to schedule H.R. 810 for a vote in the House of Representatives. A vote is likely before Memorial Day. The bill currently has 199 co-sponsors as proponents predict they have the votes to pass this historic legislation. Companion legislation in the Senate, authored by Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-UT), already has over half the Senate supporting with 58 co-sponsors.

“Americans support therapies for diabetes, Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s but are passionate about finding cures,” said Kirk. “Cures are years away but stem cell research offers the best promise of ending these diseases.”

“Under this bill, consenting couples will be able to donate for research purposes extra frozen embryos that would otherwise be destroyed,” Biggert said. “Given the promise that these stem cells hold, it’s time to drop the restrictions and allow researchers to do what they do best. It is tragic to let these cells go to waste when they could help to relieve so much suffering, from juvenile diabetes, to Alzheimer’s, to Parkinson’s disease.”

A recent poll conducted by the Winston Group found 57 percent of Republican voters support human embryonic stem cell research. A recent poll in Illinois found 64 percent of all Illinois voters support stem cell research. Rep. Schwarz said the strong public support of stem cell research sends a message to Congress to reform the current federal restrictions.

“Clear majorities of both Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, support lifting the restrictions on stem-cell research,” said Dr. Schwarz. “It is without question the correct action to take, and I commend Speaker Hastert and the Republican leadership for allowing a vote on this legislation.”

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